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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL GG RU

SUBJECT: GEORGIA: DAS BRYZA MEETING WITH MOIA VANO

MERABISHVILI

¶1. (C) Begin Summary: On August 14, Minister of Internal Affairs (MOIA) Vano Merabishvili spoke with DAS Bryza and the Ambassador Tefft about the current situation following Russia's invasion, the status of Georgian troops, and how the attacks unfolded. Shota Utiashvili, nominally head of the Statistical and Analytical Department (but in reality more of a Deputy Minister), also attended the meeting. Merabishvili acknowledged that Russian forces continued to move freely in and out of Gori, Poti, and Senaki and claimed that they were also in Zugdidi. Looting was rampant, primarily committed by Russian MOD personnel, but also by Cossacks and Chechens. Merabishvili said Georgian losses were less than has been reported, and that reports of 2,000 dead civilians in Tskhinvali are inaccurate. He estimates that Russia has 24,000 troops in Georgia, including Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Merabishvili said Georgia's MOD can rely on approximately 6,000 troops (from an initial 12,000), and that MOIA personnel are largely reliable. End Summary.

Situation on Ground in Flux

¶2. (C) Merabishvili said the situation on the ground was changing every 30 minutes. There was bombing, then quiet. He said Russian troops had been constantly moving in and out of Gori and the Port of Poti. He said more Russian officers and troops were now present in Gori. He alleged that the "Chechens and Cossacks" noted by the press are actually Russian MOD units with a few Ossetians included. He told us that his police arrested two Russians driving a truck from Senaki with looted goods on August 13. Merabishvili believed all of the Russians in Samegrelo were CIS PKF forces, but that the Russian forces in Gori were poorly equipped and organized. He claimed that the Deputy Chief of Russia's Airborne forces, General Alexander Borisov, is commanding the Russians in Gori. Merabishvili said 50 Georgian patrol police are ready to go into Gori and reestablish order as soon as the Russians leave. Utiashvili claimed that Russian forces in the villages near Gori allowed North Ossetian irregulars to plunder the area, including raping women and shooting resisters. Utiashvili claimed that they were stealing everything, from TVs to air conditioners to toilet paper. End note.)

Fighting, Casualties in South Ossetia

¶3. (C) Merabishvili claimed that press reports of 2,000 people killed in South Ossetia were "fake." He said that Georgian MOIA forces killed 13 in Tskhinvali, and Georgia's MOD lost 70 and claimed the numbers of wounded were significantly higher. According to Merabishvili, there were about 30 civilians killed in Tskhinvali, and perhaps 200 policemen. He did not have an estimate for the surrounding villages. He claimed 60 Georgian civilians were killed in a Gori apartment by a single bomb, likely a Backfire bomber. Utiashvili stated that there were 17 Georgians killed in Senaki, primarily by bombing, as well as four at the military

base. He said eight people were killed by bombs in Poti. Merabishvili estimated that Georgia is facing a flood of around 200,000 refugees.

Invasion of Upper Kodori

14. (C) In Kodori, Merabishvili reported that General Chaban (head of the CIS PKF, stationed in Abkhazia) had blocked Kodori from both sides, prior to the Russian Air Force dropping 300 bombs on the area. Merabishvili said that his forces suffered three wounded, while they shot down one airplane and one helicopter. He told us there was no ground battle in Kodori, as his men (approximately 500) escaped into the forest, where they remained. Utiashvili claimed that General Borisov led the operation, which included 130 Russian military vehicles. Aside from these 500 men, Merabishvili said of Georgian MOIA personnel, only patrol police remain inside the zone of conflict in Poti, Zugdidi, and Kutaisi.

24,000 Russian Troops in Georgia

15. (C) Utiashvili alleged there are now 9,000 Russian troops and 350 military vehicles (including tanks, armored personnel carriers, and trucks) in Abkhazia. Some of these troops are airborne, both in Gali and Zugdidi. He estimated there are now 15,000-plus Russian troops in South Ossetia.

"Forget Georgia" Russians Say

16. (C) Merabishvili said the Russians are now telling Georgian civilians in Zugdidi and Samegrelo region that they "should forget Georgia." He claimed the Russians are testing former MOIA (under Shevardnadze) Igor Giorgadze's name in Gali and Zugdidi, as a potential new President/leader. (Note: Press has reported that the deposed, exiled Giorgadze has been sighted in the Zugdidi region accompanying Russian troops, although some now argue that the Georgians are floating this rumor to drum up additional support for the Saakashvili government. End note.)

Russian Ballistic Missiles Targeted Georgia

17. (C) Merabishvili said that the Russians used "Iskander" missiles (SS-26) to target Gori's city center and the Baku-Supsa oil pipeline near Rustavi. Merabishvili provided photographic evidence of the second attack, which he claims originated from Dagestan, to DAS Bryza. (Note: Provided by email to the Task Force and Sit Room. End note.) Post has seen press photos of another Russian missile that landed in Poti. Merabishvili alleged that BP has denied the attack on their pipeline in order to protect their stock value. Utiashvili said that a Russian officer possessed 2,000 new Russian passports (photos have been provided to Post), which he was planting on corpses to inflate the body count of "Russian citizens." Merabishvili confirmed that the Russians had destroyed several Coast Guard cutters, although most of Georgia's border guards had gone to Turkey.

Shelling of Tamarasheni Provoked Invasion

18. (C) Merabishvili told us that the escalation of the conflict occurred after the villages of Nuli and Avnevi were destroyed. Since OSCE observers were hunkered down in Tskhinvali, they could not hear the bombing in Avnevi. Merabishvili said that previous to this, de-facto Ossetian leader Kokoity would always stop the escalation. This time, however, the Georgians and Ossetians traded fire back and forth, as the fighting increased from small arms fire, to mortars, to 122-mm mortars, to artillery. Merabishvili tried to get the Ossetians to stop, but they would not. When DAS Bryza asked who decided to invade Tskhinvali and why, Utiashvili said the Georgian side was compelled to respond to attacks on Tamarasheni. Utiashvili said 44 people were

killed in the ensuing three days the Russians bombed Tskhinvali.

"Heroes took Tskhinvali, Held Four Days"

¶ 9. (C) Merabishvili said that 600 of his MOIA special forces, with their Kobra vehicles (armored Humvees with 40-mm guns), took Tskhinvali in six hours, against 2,000 defenders. He claimed that in the future they will use the attack to teach tactics. He returned again to the subject, noting that "we held Tskhinvali for four days despite the Russians' bombing. Half of our men were wounded, but none died. These guys are heroes." (Comment: Post understands MOIA control of Tskhinvali was actually closer to 24 hours. End comment.)

Current Troop Status

¶ 10. (C) Asked about the loyalty of Georgia's troops, Merabishvili said the MOD currently has 4,000 soldiers they can count on. He expected this number to increase to 6,000 following President Bush's speech. Merabishvili claimed that 70 percent of MOIA's initial paramilitary numbers are loyal and accountable, and that his special forces are 100 percent reliable. In addition, he said the patrol police are functioning and reliable. (Comment: Post's INL-contracted police trainer, confirms this information. The Patrol Police's command and control is functioning and they are patrolling throughout the country, except for the conflict zones where they do not have access. End comment.)

Looking Ahead

¶ 11. (C) Merabishvili expressed concern that the Russians intended to keep troops in Gori. DAS Bryza told Merabishvili of his August 14th strategy session with President Saakashvili. Bryza suggested that the next steps were:

- Get the Russian troops out of Georgia, and end the violence.
- Take measures to shore up the economy (secure the banking sector and reassure investors).
- Repair the commercial sector (including opening the roads and Port of Poti).
- Provide relief and assistance to IDPs.

Conflict resolution would then follow. Bryza expressed his view that the UN Friends process was finished, and that Kokoity should be ostracized by the international community. He encouraged Merabishvili to present Georgia's version of the collapse of the cease fire on August 7 publicly.

TEFFT